Intercultural education for all? An investigation of the impact of school composition on intercultural education.

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Introduction

As most Western societies are becoming increasingly ethnically diverse, scholars, educators and policy-makers are searching for appropriate ways to serve these diverse student bodies. One particular response to the challenge of education in a multiethnic society is to implement multicultural educational practices (Banks, 1993; Dunn, 1997; Gay, 2000; Banks & Banks, 2001). Multicultural education is conceptualized in various ways by scholars, and it has several different dimensions (Banks, 1993; Bennett, 2001). In this study we focus mainly on what Banks (1993) calls the *content integration* dimension of multicultural education, which he defines as: "The extent to which teachers use examples, data, and information from a variety of cultures and groups to illustrate key concepts, principals, generalizations, and theories in their subject area or discipline" (p. 5). We choose to look at the content integration dimension, not just because it is what most people associate with multicultural education, but more importantly, because content integration is empirically "the least studied aspect of multicultural education" (Zirkel, 2008, p. 1150). Whereas for Banks the notion of 'multicultural' also covers gender and other forms of diversity, this article focuses primarily on *ethnicity*, thus on *multiethnic content integration*.

Various scholars have argued that incorporating practices of multicultural and multiethnic education have positive influences on students' academic engagement, on intergroup relations, on ethnic and linguistic identity development, and at least indirectly, on academic achievement (Grant & Koskela, 1986; Bean, Cantuvalerio, Senior & White, 1999;

Bigler, 1999; Powers, 2006; Agirdag, 2009; for an elaborated review see Zirkel, 2008). However, while the *effects* of multicultural/multiethnic education are well studied, scholars have rarely focused on its *determinants*: the impact of teacher characteristics (e.g. gender, ethnicity, age, beliefs, etc…) and the effects of school characteristics (e.g. school sector, student composition, etc…) on multiethnic content integration are largely unknown. In other words, even if scholars argue that multicultural education has favorable effects on students, we do not know to which extent the integration of multiethnic content is determined by school and teacher characteristics. The main purpose of this study is to fill this research lacuna by examining the determinants of teachers (self-reported) multi-ethnic content integration.

Determinants of multiethnic content integration

Teachers' beliefs about generalized diversity

To understand teacher behavior, educational researcher point at the importance of *teacher beliefs*. There is a large consensus that teachers' behavior in the classroom is influenced by their general beliefs (see reviews by Pajares, 1992; Fang, 1996). As such, the extent to which teachers incorporate multiethnic educational content might be partly determined by their *general* beliefs about diversity, i.e. diversity including ethnicity, gender, social class, disability, and sexual preference (see also Garmon, 2004, 2005). However, as noted by Pohan and Aguilar (2001), a distinction should be made between personal beliefs and professional beliefs about (generalized) diversity. Even though personal beliefs and professional beliefs are interrelated, they could be in conflict. For instance, in a personal context, a teacher might believe that religious diversity is an asset for the broader society. At the same time, within a professional, educational context, this same teacher might believe that a religiously diverse school is not preferable. Therefore, in this article we will examine the impact of both teachers' personal and professional beliefs about generalized diversity on the extent of their multiethnic practices in the classroom.

While teachers' beliefs about generalized diversity can be expected to be related to multiethnic practices, such beliefs might be, in turn, influenced by teacher background variables and also by contextual school characteristics. Therefore it is important to control for such variables. In this article, at the teacher-level we include teachers' gender, ethnicity, family socioeconomic status (SES), age/years of experience and teacher type, while at school-level we control for school size, denomination, ethnic composition, and academic achievement composition.

Teachers' background characteristics

The above mentioned teacher and school characteristics might also be *directly* related to the extent of teachers' multicultural practices. With respect to teacher background variables, ethnicity in particular might play an important role. An overwhelming majority of teachers in Flanders are native Belgians (see Agirdag, Loobuyck & Van Houtte, 2012). However, these teachers may lack experience and knowledge of ethnic diversity (see Sleeter, 2001). Thus we expect that non-native teachers are more likely to integrate multiethnic practices.

Furthermore teachers' years of experience/age might have an effect (see Gallavan, 1998). We expect that younger teachers will be more inclined to incorporate multicultural educational practices, as in the last decade teacher education programs in Flanders have instituted courses of multicultural education and more attention is paid to multiethnic issues in education.

School characteristics

In addition to teacher characteristics, school characteristics might have a direct influence as well. First, the ethnic composition of the school might have an impact on the extent of provided multiethnic content. For example, Lewis (2001) argues that in predominantly white schools racial/ethnic diversity is a taboo topic as the discourse of teachers and school personal in such schools is manifestly color-blind. In a study with pre-service teachers, Capella-

Santana (2003) has found that fieldwork experiences in ethnically diverse settings promote positive changes in teacher candidates' multicultural attitudes and knowledge. Therefore, we expect that in schools with few non-natives, teachers will focus less on multiethnic education.

A second school characteristic that might have an effect is school denomination. In Flanders, more than half of elementary schools are Catholic. In contrast with non-denominational state schools that encourage multiculturalism, Catholic schools tend to stress the transmission of traditional values (Brutsaert, 1998). These traditional values might be in conflict with more progressive values related to multicultural education. Hence, in this study we examine whether teachers in Catholic and non-denominational state schools differ with respect to the extent of multiethnic educational practices they incorporate.

Hypotheses

Based on this literature overview, we can formulate five hypotheses. At the school-level, we expect that teachers will provide more multiethnic educational practices in schools with more non-native pupils (Hypothesis 1), and in non-Catholic schools (Hypothesis 2). At the teacher-level, we expect that higher levels of multiethnic educational practices will be reported when the teacher has a non-native background (Hypothesis 3), when the teacher is younger or has less years of experience (Hypothesis 4), and when the teacher holds more positive personal and professional beliefs about generalized diversity (Hypothesis 5).

Methods

Sample

This study is conducted in Flanders, i.e. the northern part of Belgium. The official Flemish education development goals for primary education state that ‘multicultural education is a task for *all* schools.’ (Flemish Ministry of Education and Formation, 2010, p. 89). We used data gathered during the academic year 2008-2009 from 706 teachers by means of anonymous questionnaires across 68 primary schools in Flanders. Additionally, 2,845 pupils from the fifth

and sixth grades (mean age of 11.61) of these schools filled in a questionnaire. Multistage sampling was conducted. In the first instance, in order to encompass the entire range of ethnic composition, we selected three cities in Flanders with ethnically diverse populations. Second, using data gathered from the Flemish Educational Department, we chose 116 primary schools within these selected cities and asked them to participate; 54 percent of the schools agreed to do so. The school non-response rate was relatively high because Flemish schools are commonly swamped with such requests from researchers, to which they generally agree on a first come, first served basis. Nevertheless, the non-response analysis has revealed that the participating schools did not statistically differ from those that opted out in terms of school sector (i.e., Catholic vs. non-denominational schools) or ethnic composition.

Research design

Given that we are dealing with a clustered sample of teachers nested within schools and with data at different levels (teacher-level and school-level), the use of hierarchical linear modeling (multilevel modeling) is most appropriate (SAS PROC MIXED, Singer, 1998). As is common in multilevel analyses, we start by estimating the unconditional model to determine the degree of variance in multiethnic content integration among schools. We then add variables stepwise into the model. First, we examine the impact of the school-level variables. In the second model, we include teacher background variables (gender, ethnicity, family SES, age/years of experience, teacher type) and in the third model we enter teachers' generalized personal and professional beliefs about diversity. In variables measured by means of a scale (see Variables section), responses were imputed for missing values by way of item correlation substitution: a missing value for one item is replaced by the value of the item correlating most highly with that item (Huisman, 2000). Remaining missing values and missing values in other variables were handled in the analyses by run-time deletion.

Variables

Outcome

To assess to what extent teachers engage in multiethnic educational practices, we used a Likert-type scale that consists of five statements: (1) In the classroom, I focus explicitly on the topic of ethnic diversity; (2) I offer content that reflects all aspects of the multicultural society; (3) Because of neutrality, I pay little attention to ethnic differences in the classroom (reverse coded); (4) I expose the multicultural social environment in the overall design and the furnishing of the classroom; (5) Ethnic diversity rarely occurs in the course material I use (reverse coded). There were five answer categories, ranging from 'absolutely do not agree' (scored 1) to 'completely agree' (scored 5). Scores of these items were averaged, and this scale yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.74. On average teachers scored 3.41 (*SD* = 0.58; see Table 1 for descriptives).

Teacher-level variables

With respect to *gender*, most teachers in our sample were female (80%; Table 1).

Teachers' *ethnicity* was determined by self-identification. Teachers were asked to identify themselves as being from native Belgian or non-native background. 6.29 % of the teachers in our sample identified themselves as being non-native. T

Teachers' *family SES* was measured by means of the occupational status of teachers' father and mother (Erikson, Goldthorpe & Portocarero, 1979); the highest of both was used as an indicator of the teachers' SES of origin. Teachers had a mean SES of 5.04 (*SD* = 1.89; Table 1).

Given the high correlation between *age* and *years of teaching experience* (Pearson r = 0.94; $p < 0.001$), we had to choose one of these two variables to enter into the model to avoid multicollinearity. We opted for teaching experience, because there were more missing values for age. As such, teaching experience was measured by the number of years that a teacher had

been working in his/her participating school. On average teachers in our sample had 15.9 years of teaching experience (*SD* = 10.14; Table 1).

Teacher type distinguishes between regular class-teachers (code 0) and non-regular teachers, such as teachers for physical or musical education (code 1). In our sample, around 60 % of the teachers are identified as regular class teachers (see Table 1).

Teachers' personal and professional beliefs about generalized diversity are respectively assessed by the Personal Beliefs About Diversity Scale (PERbad) and the Professional Beliefs About Diversity Scale (PRObad) (see Pogan & Aguilar, 2001). It is important to note that these scales do not only measure beliefs about *ethnic* diversity, but *generalized* diversity including beliefs about gender, disability, sexual orientation, social class, religious and linguistic diversity. The original PERbad as proposed by Pogan and Aguilar (2001) consisted of 15 items. However, we removed one item due to inconsistency, which we detected by an exploratory factor analysis. Examples of included items are: 'People should develop meaningful friendships with others from different ethnic groups', 'It is not a good idea for same-sex couples to raise children' (reverse coded) and 'In general, men make better leaders than women.' (reverse coded). There were five answer categories, ranging from 'absolutely do not agree' (1) to 'completely agree' (5). Responses to the fourteen items were averaged and this scale yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.80. On average, teachers' score on the PERbad scale was 3.81 (*SD* = 0.44; Table 1). The original PRObad-scale consisted of 25 items. However, some of these items were directly related to features of the US educational system such as standardized tests, which do not exist in Belgium. Therefore, we only included items that were applicable to the Belgian educational system and items that did not harm the internal consistency of the scale. Finally, 11 items were included, for example: 'Students and teachers would benefit from having a basic understanding of different religions'; 'Gays and lesbians should not be allowed to teach in schools'(reverse coded); and 'Teachers should not

be expected to adjust their preferred mode of instruction to accommodate the needs of all students' (reverse coded). There were five answer categories, ranging from 'absolutely do not agree' (1) to 'completely agree' (5). Responses to the eleven items were averaged and this scale yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.71. On average, teachers' PRObad score was 3.85 (*SD* = 0.39; Table 1).

School-level variables

Ethnic school composition was measured by the proportion of non-native (non-West-European) pupils in a school according to our database. The distinction between native Belgian and non-native pupils was based on the birthplace of pupils' grandmothers. If these data were missing, we considered their mothers and fathers' birthplaces. This is a common approach to conceptualize ethnicity in European studies (see Agirdag, Van Houtte & Van Avermaet, 2011). The ethnic composition ranged from 2.63 % to 100 % non-native pupils (see Table 1).

To assess a school's *academic achievement composition* the pupils in our sample completed a math test, developed by Dudal and Deloof (2004), based on the Flemish educational attainment levels of the fifth grade of the primary education. The test consists of 60 items covering elementary arithmetic, problem solving, fractions, point numbers, and long divisions. To ensure that the items were curriculum-based, school principals were asked to approve the test. Two schools were removed from the analysis because they could not confirm that the test was curriculum-based. The test yielded a Cronbachs alpha of 0.91. The academic achievement composition of the school was calculated by aggregating the individual scores of pupils. Table 1 illustrates that the mean achievement composition score was 39.17 (*SD* = 6.46).

The variable *school sector* distinguishes between 36 non-Catholic schools (mostly public schools; code 0) and 32 Catholic schools (code 1; see Table 1). It should be noted that in the Flemish educational system, no distinction is made between public schools and private schools with respect to state support.

Finally, we determined the *school size* from the total number of pupils, using data gathered from the Flemish Educational Department. The number of pupils varied from 91 in the smallest school to 526 in the largest. The schools had an average of 223 pupils (*SD* = 104.03; Table 1).

Table1. Descriptive statistics: frequencies (N), range (minimum and maximum), means or %, standard deviations (SD).

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean or %	SD
Outcome					
Multiethnic content integration	656	1	5	3.408	0.581
School-Level					
Ethnic composition (% non-natives)	68	2.63	100.00	51.500	34.164
Academic achievement composition	66	15.00	49.76	39.173	6.461
School sector (1 = Catholic)	68	0	1	47.06%	
School size	68	91	526	222.912	104.029
Teacher-Level					
Gender (1 = female)	689	0	1	19.01%	
Ethnicity (1 = non-native)	700	0	1	6.29%	
Family SES	693	1	8	5.036	1.885
Years of experience	704	1	41	15.902	10.140
Teacher type (1 = non-regular)	706	0	1	40.93%	
Personal beliefs (PERbad)	656	2.43	5	3.808	0.444
Professional beliefs (PRObad)	653	2.82	5	3.846	0.394

Results

Unconditional model

Does the school context in general matter with respect to provided multiethnic content? To provide an answer to this question, we look at the variance components from Model 0 in

Table 2. We are particularly interested in the variance at the school-level, computed as the between-school variance component divided by the sum of within-school and between-school variance [$\tau_0 / (\sigma^2 + \tau_0)$]. Consistent with most school-effects studies (for a review see Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000), most of the variation occurs within schools, between teachers. Nevertheless, justifying the need for a multilevel analysis, a significant amount of the variance in multiethnic educational practices is at the school-level. More specifically, 4.95% ($p < 0.01$) of the variance in multiethnic content integration lies between schools. Hence, the school environment is a significant context regarding differences in the integration of multiethnic content.

School-level determinants

In Model 1 of Table 2, we include school-level influences of multiethnic education. Here we report standardized gamma coefficients (γ^*) to determine the strength of the effects. Standardized coefficients are achieved by multiplying the unstandardized coefficients (γ) with the standard deviation of the explanatory variable divided by the standard deviation of the dependent variable (Hox, 1995).

In support of *Hypothesis 1* (see above), Table 2 indicates that in schools with higher proportions of non-native pupils, teachers tend to provide more multiethnic education ($\gamma^* = 0.204$; $p < 0.001$). We also find that the academic achievement composition of the school is positively related to the extent of multiethnic content integration: in schools where pupils' mean academic performance is higher, teachers provide more multicultural education ($\gamma^* = 0.127$; $p < 0.05$).

Our results indicate that the size of the school and school sector are not significantly associated with the level of provided multiethnic education. Hence, *Hypothesis 2* is not supported by the data.

Teacher-level determinants

In Model 2 (see Table 2), we include teacher background characteristics. From all teacher background variables, only teachers' ethnic background is significantly related to multiethnic education: non-native teachers report higher levels of multiethnic content integration than native teachers, although the strength of this effect is rather low ($\gamma^* = 0.082$; $p < 0.05$; Model 2). Teachers' gender, family SES, years of teaching experience and teacher type are not related to the level of multiethnic education. Hence, we find support for *Hypothesis 3* (about ethnicity), but not for *Hypothesis 4* (about age/years of experience).

Teacher beliefs about generalized diversity

In Model 3 (Table 2), teachers' personal and professional beliefs about generalized diversity are included. It is clear that both personal and professional beliefs are associated with multiethnic content integration, respectively ($\gamma^* = 0.173$; $p < 0.001$) and ($\gamma^* = 0.200$; $p < 0.001$). Teachers' professional beliefs about diversity are more strongly associated with multicultural education than their personal beliefs. Hence, in support of *Hypothesis 5*, we find that teachers who have more positive personal and professional beliefs about generalized diversity (that is diversity including beliefs about gender, disability, sexual orientation, social class, religious and linguistics diversity), are inclined to provide more multiethnic educational practices.

Table 2. Results of multilevel analysis for multiethnic content integration. Gamma coefficients γ, standardized gamma coefficients γ* (in italics), standard errors (in parentheses) and variance components

		Model 0	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
School-level								
Ethnic composition (% non-natives)	γ		0.003***	(0.001)	0.003***	(0.001)	0.003***	(0.001)
	*γ**		*0.204****		*0.197****		*0.187****	
Academic achievement composition	γ		0.012*	(0.005)	0.011*	(0.005)	0.014**	(0.005)
	*γ**		*0.127**		*0.122**		*0.155***	
School sector (1 = Catholic)	γ		-0.088	(0.052)	-0.103	(0.053)	-0.063	(0.050)
	*γ**		*-0.076*		*-0.089*		*-0.055*	
School size	γ		0.000	(0.000)	0.000	(0.000)	0.000	(0.000)
	*γ**		*-0.021*		*-0.018*		*-0.011*	
Teacher-level								
Gender (1 = female)	γ				0.037	(0.061)	0.041	(0.058)
	*γ**				*0.025*		*0.028*	
Ethnicity (1 = non-native)	γ				0.197*	(0.099)	0.189*	(0.094)
	*γ**				*0.082**		*0.079**	
Family SES	γ				0.013	(0.013)	0.013	(0.012)
	*γ**				*0.042*		*0.042*	
Years of experience	γ				0.002	(0.002)	0.003	(0.002)
	*γ**				*0.033*		*0.056*	
Teacher type (1 = non-regular)	γ				0.042	(0.049)	0.069	(0.047)
	*γ**				*0.035*		*0.059*	
Personal beliefs (PERbad)	γ						0.226***	(0.069)
	*γ**						*0.173****	
Professional beliefs (PRObad)	γ						0.295***	(0.077)
	*γ**						*0.200****	
Variance components								
Between-school	τ_0	0.017**	0.005		0.004		0.002	
Within-school	σ^2	0.322***	0.324***		0.322***		0.292***	

*p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001

Discussion and conclusion

In an increasingly ethnically diverse society, scholars have stressed the importance of multicultural education. While the effects of multicultural educational practices are well documented, studies on the determinants of multicultural/multiethnic education are virtually

non-existent. This study aimed to fill this lacuna by examining the effects of teacher-level and school-level characteristics on multicultural education, more specifically, on multiethnic content integration as provided by teachers.

Based on a brief review of the literature, we formulated five hypotheses, which were partially supported by the results of multilevel analyses. In line with our expectation, we found that teachers' ethnic background is related to multicultural content provided, with non-native teachers reporting higher levels of multiethnic content than native Belgian teachers. Teachers' personal and professional beliefs about generalized diversity were also related to practices of multiethnic education. As such, we can distinguish two strategies for school administrators to enhance multiethnic education. First, they might recruit more non-native teachers. Second, they might encourage the school staff to attend diversity training programs that are documented to effectively change teachers' beliefs about diversity. For an in-depth discussion of key factors for changing teachers' beliefs about diversity, we refer to studies by Garmon (2004, 2005).

At the school-level, we found that the ethnic composition of the student body is a good predictor of the multiethnic content integration: in schools where more non-native students are enrolled, teachers tend to incorporate more multiethnic educational practices. In fact, this finding is a disturbing one: just as single-sex schools do not only provide single-sex biology, there is no reason why only schools with non-native pupils should focus on multiethnic education. On the contrary, in particular native-White students in schools with few non-native peers need to become familiar with ethnic diversity. For those native-White students, the school context might be the *only* context where they become familiar with ethnic diversity of the broader society (see Van Houtte & Stevens, 2009). As such, educational policymakers and teacher education programs should especially emphasize the importance of multicultural/multiethnic education in schools with few ethnic minority students.

A second school-level variable that has a significant impact is the academic achievement level. It seems that in schools where pupils achieve less, teachers tend to focus less on multiethnic education. Even though multicultural education is a part of the official Flemish attainment levels and development goals for primary education (Flemish Ministry of Education and Formation 2010), teachers might consider multicultural educational as something secondary to 'core' subjects such as mathematics. Consequently in schools where pupils' academic performance is rather low, teachers might be more inclined to neglect multicultural educational practices. However, this post-hoc explanation should be examined in further research.

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